

A VOYAGE PERILOUS

Thrilling Experience of Labrador's Mariner Missionary



By WILFRED T. GRENFELL

Drawings by George Harding

IT was Easter Sunday; but with us still winter, and everything covered with snow and ice. Immediately after morning service word came from our hospital that messengers with a large dog team had just arrived from a settlement sixty miles south to procure a doctor for a most urgent case. It was that of a young man upon whom I had operated a fortnight before, whose wound had not healed properly. I feared amputation of a leg would be necessary this time. Obviously no time was to be lost; so, packing my instruments, dressings, and drugs, I harnessed my best team of dogs and set out at once, leaving the messengers to follow.

Late in April there is risk of getting wet; so I was prepared with extra outfit, including a change of garments, snowshoes, rifle, compass, ax, and oilskins. My dogs, a powerful team, could not be held back, and though I twice waited for the other sleigh, I had reached by nightfall a village twenty miles on the way, had fed my dogs, and was gathering a few people for prayers, when they again caught up with me.

Advance Precautions

DURING the night the wind shifted to the northeast, bringing fog and rain, softening the snow, and driving a heavy sea into the bay. Our drive in the morning was some forty miles, the first ten on a wide arm of the sea over salt water ice. In order not to be long separated from the messengers I sent them about two hours before me, appointing as rendezvous a log tilt we have built in the woods as a halfway house; for there is no one living along all that long coast line, and in case of accident, which has happened more than once, we keep there dry clothing, drugs, and food.

I found myself obliged to keep on the "ballicaters," or ice barricades, much farther up the bay than I had expected. The sea of the night before had smashed the ice right up to the landwash. There were gaping chasms between the enormous ice blocks, which we call "pans," and a half-mile out it was all clear water. An island three miles out had kept intact a bridge of ice, and thus I reached the island. Thence it was four miles across to a rocky promontory on the mainland, a course that saved me going many miles around the shore. As far as the eye could see the ice seemed good, but very rough. Obviously it had been smashed up by the heavy sea and packed in again by the wind; but I thought it all frozen together.

All went well until I was about a quarter of a

mile from the landing point; then the wind fell, and I found myself traveling in loose "sish" ice, which was like porridge. I could drive my whip handle through it. "Sish" ice consists of the fragments pounded off the large "pans" and crowded together in a mass on the surface of the water. So quickly did the ice run abroad, when relieved of the wind pressure, that already I could not see a "pan" larger than ten feet square.

Retreat was impossible; nor did there seem any way of escape from the "pan" on which I found myself. I tore off my oilskins, threw myself on my hands and knees by the side of the komatik, or sledge, and ordered the dogs ahead for the shore. In less than twenty yards the frightened dogs stopped and the komatik sank into the slob. When the dogs pulled they too sank into it. Earlier in the season the father of the boy I was going to attend had been drowned in this way, his dogs tangling their traces about him in the slob. This flashed upon me, and scrambling forward I cut the traces in the water, and wound the leader's trace about my wrist.

The Ride on a Pan

THERE was a pan about twenty-five yards away the size of a dining room table, and upon this the leader soon scrambled. I hauled myself along the line until he chanced to turn, and then his harness slipped from him. It was impossible to swim in the "sish" ice, and so I lay there thinking it would soon be over, and wondering if anyone would ever know how it happened. Suddenly I saw the trace of another big dog which was making for the pan. Along this I hauled, using him as bow anchor, but much bothered by the other floundering dogs, one of which climbed on my shoulders, pushing me farther down into the "sish." Finally I reached the pan, and helped the dogs upon it, as they followed in the lane I had made.

But there was only a yard or two of the pan left; soon there would be nothing. Taking off moccasins, coat, gloves, and cap,—everything I could spare,—I tied my knife and moccasins to the backs of the dogs. The moccasins, made of tanned sealskin, came up to my hips, and, filled with water, had im-

peded my progress. Taking the traces from all the dogs but the two lightest, I gave them their full length, and tied the near ends about my wrists. But nothing could induce the dogs to move ahead, and, though I threw them off the pan repeatedly, they struggled back upon it. Fortunately I had with me a featherweight spaniel with large furry paws, which would retrieve for me. I threw a piece of ice to another pan, and he managed to get over the slob after it. The other dogs followed. Then, taking all the run I could on my little pan, I made a dive, slithering with the impetus along the surface, until once more I sank through it. After a long struggle I was able to haul myself by the traces to this new pan. But it also was not large enough to bear us; and so this process had to be repeated immediately.

Vain Efforts Against the Wind

I NOW realized that, though I had been working toward shore, an off shore wind had really driven us a hundred yards off the course. The widening gap kept full of the pounded ice, which rose to the surface as the pressure lessened. Through this no man could possibly go.

I was on a piece of ice some ten by twenty feet, which, when I examined it, proved to be only snow covered slob frozen into a mass. I feared it would break up very soon in the heavy sea, which was increasing as the ice drove off the shore before the wind. At first we drifted in the direction of a rocky point on which a heavy surf was breaking. Here I thought to swim ashore. But suddenly we struck a rock; a large piece broke off the already small pan, and what was left swung about in the backwash and went right off to sea. This accident revealed that my pan was only a foot thick. My only hope now was that the messengers, knowing I was alone, and failing to keep my tryst, would perhaps come back to look for me. But this they did not do.

A Tantalizing View

THE westerly wind, our coldest at this season, was rapidly rising. It was tantalizing as I stood there with next to nothing on, and every stitch soaked in ice water, to see, some fifty yards away, my komatik. It was still above water, with food, hot tea in a patent bottle, dry clothing, matches, wood, and everything for making a fire wherewith to attract attention. It is easy to see a black object on the ice in the daytime; for its gorgeous whiteness reveals the least thing. But, alas! the tops of bushes